

Writing is something that affects everyone. Writing can cause us joy, fear or healing. Writing for me has done all of these things. From a happy novel, to a sad one, a horror story or a story of hope. Stories of hope are something that have affected me greatly throughout my life, especially when I was younger. When I was six my father, Michael Ryan passed away, after a two year battle with Leukemia. When this happened many people gave me books about grievance and remembrance. Even though these were children's books, their words helped me grieve, cope and gave me hope for the future. This is a main reason why I am thankful for writing and the power it has.

My father was a former Priest, teacher, and the Principal of Somerville Middle School. He was the best Dad and an amazing person too. Losing him was catastrophic for me, my family and those around. As a six year old, toys and books were an everyday thing for me and having books that could help me cope with this new loss was important. Many of these books I got were work books where the reader had to write things in or answer questions. By writing in this book I was able to release some of my feelings and express how I felt. This was a critical part of my grieving process and I am so thankful for the power of writing and how it can heal.

My Mom enrolled me in an Art Therapy program for children who had suffered the loss of loved ones. I had attended this program for several years. It was through art, writing, and sharing my feelings with other kids my age that I was able to cope with my loss. One project that I remember vividly was a fish kite that I made. I wrote a letter to my dad on it, tied a string to it, and flew it in the air so that he could read my message. Getting to write to him felt amazing and it felt like I was talking to him and getting to share my feelings with him.

The grieving process has been ongoing throughout my life. As I have reached different ages and levels of awareness I have felt the grief in different ways. As I got older I found that journaling or writing my feelings down was a great tool for me to cope with my feelings. I can freely express myself, identify my feelings, and feel better in the process. As I have said before, I am thankful for writing and the power that it can have throughout my life!

My Mom also shared with me letters and cards that people wrote after my Dad died and some were for me to read when I got older. Friends of my Dad wanted to share with me who my Dad was and how he changed their lives for the better. These written words sent to me by friends and co-workers of my Dad's really helped me to see who he was and to help heal my heart. He was a man of integrity and had great compassion for his students, co-workers, and friends. He did so much for many, and he was who I always thought of him to be - the greatest Dad in the world. I was so proud that he was my Dad.

Throughout my years at Somerville High School, English class has been my favorite class. I love to read and write and have excelled in these classes. My English teacher this year has been preparing us for college and relating his experiences to us in ways that will help us to succeed past the walls of Somerville High School. My Towson University flag is proudly displayed in his classroom along with other flags of colleges that my classmates are enrolling in.

I know that it is because of my writing that it helped me get into Towson University! My college essay was all about the challenges I had to overcome growing up which included being diagnosed with an anxiety disorder when I was in sixth grade. I have had to work so hard to deal with this anxiety on a daily basis but know that I am a much stronger person because of it.

My interest in dance began when I was 3 years old. I loved to dance and began taking classes. It is here where I knew my life belonged together with dance and my passion for it grew. I auditioned for the Dance Honors program at Somerset County Vocational Technical High School where I am a shared time student and have been in the program for 3 years. I also studied at the New Jersey Ballet for 5 years and have been dancing with Gotta Dance in Branchburg since I was 3. I performed in the Nutcracker with New Jersey Ballet for the past several years. If you have seen the Nutcracker at the Morristown Performing Arts Center, you may have seen me! Currently I am a member of the Showstoppers Dance Company and am preparing for the 15 shows in June through Gotta Dance. Last summer I participated in the Summer Dance Intensive Program at Rutgers and Rockettes Intensive in New York. I also plan on attending the Rockettes Intensive again this summer.

I decided to pursue a Fine Arts degree in Dance because of my passion for Dance. I applied to several colleges this year and had many auditions. It was a very competitive process, but one that was rewarding as well.

I am excited to attend Towson University in the fall and study Dance. I know that my writing skills will help me during my studies. I know that all of the hours I've spent dancing will help me as I pursue my dream of studying and performing dance.

I know how proud of me my Dad is. There is not a day that goes by that I don't think of him. I honor his memory every year by meeting the recipients of the Michael G. Ryan award presented through Somerville Middle School. We have kept in touch with my Dad's colleagues over the years and they still speak so highly of him and how he had touched their lives. Over the years I participated in the Light The Night program and raised funds for the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society. I began carrying my team banner when I was 7 and have glorious memories of marching with my team in Morristown and chanting my Dad's name. I carry him in my heart and know that he is my biggest cheerleader!

It has been an honor applying for the Drew McLachlan Memorial Scholarship. He seemed like an amazing man, so full of life and had great passions too. I am deeply sorry for your loss and hope to make him proud if I am selected as the winner of the Drew McLachlan Memorial Scholarship. I hope you consider me for your finalist.

Thank you!

Michaela Ryan